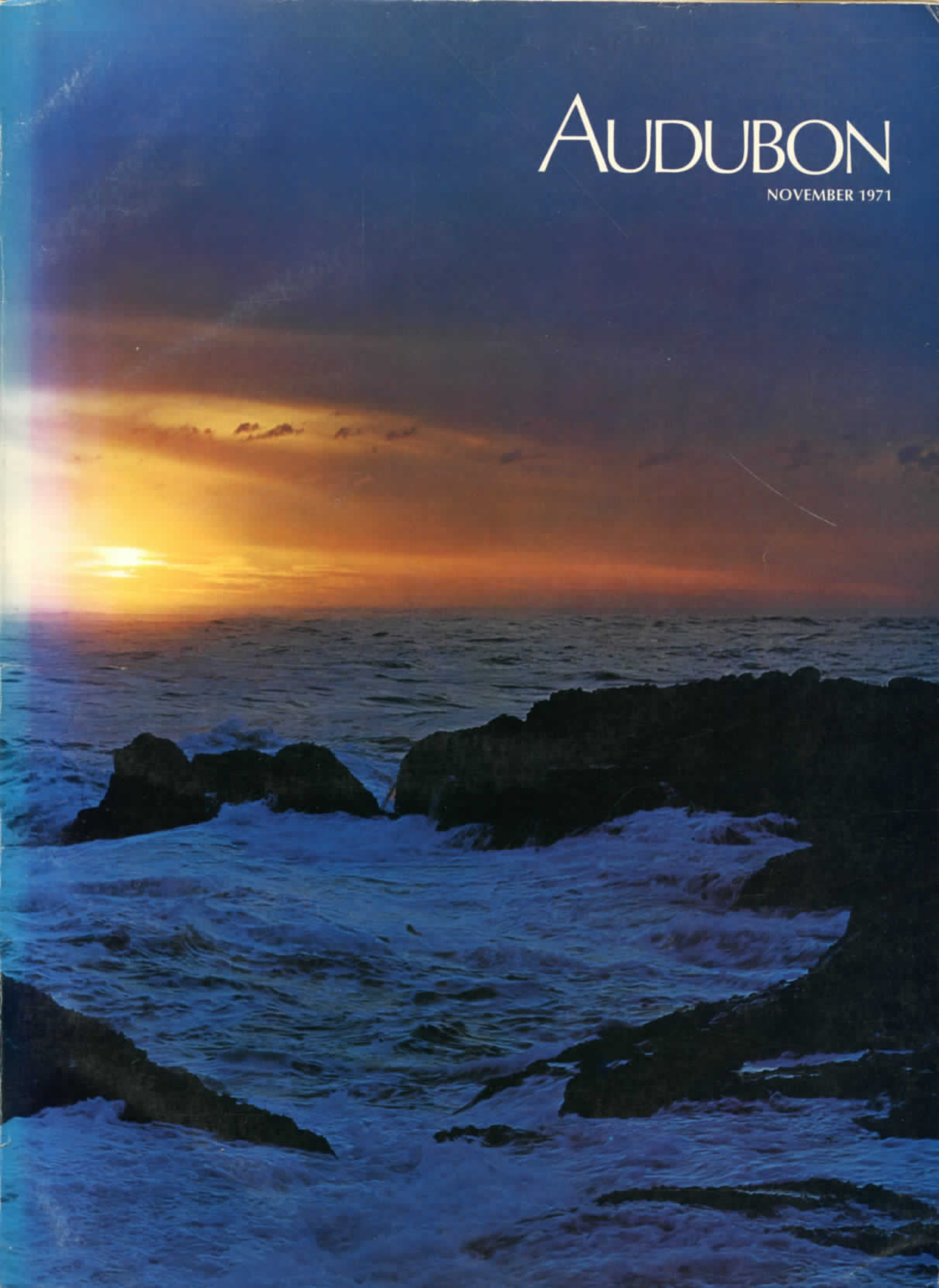


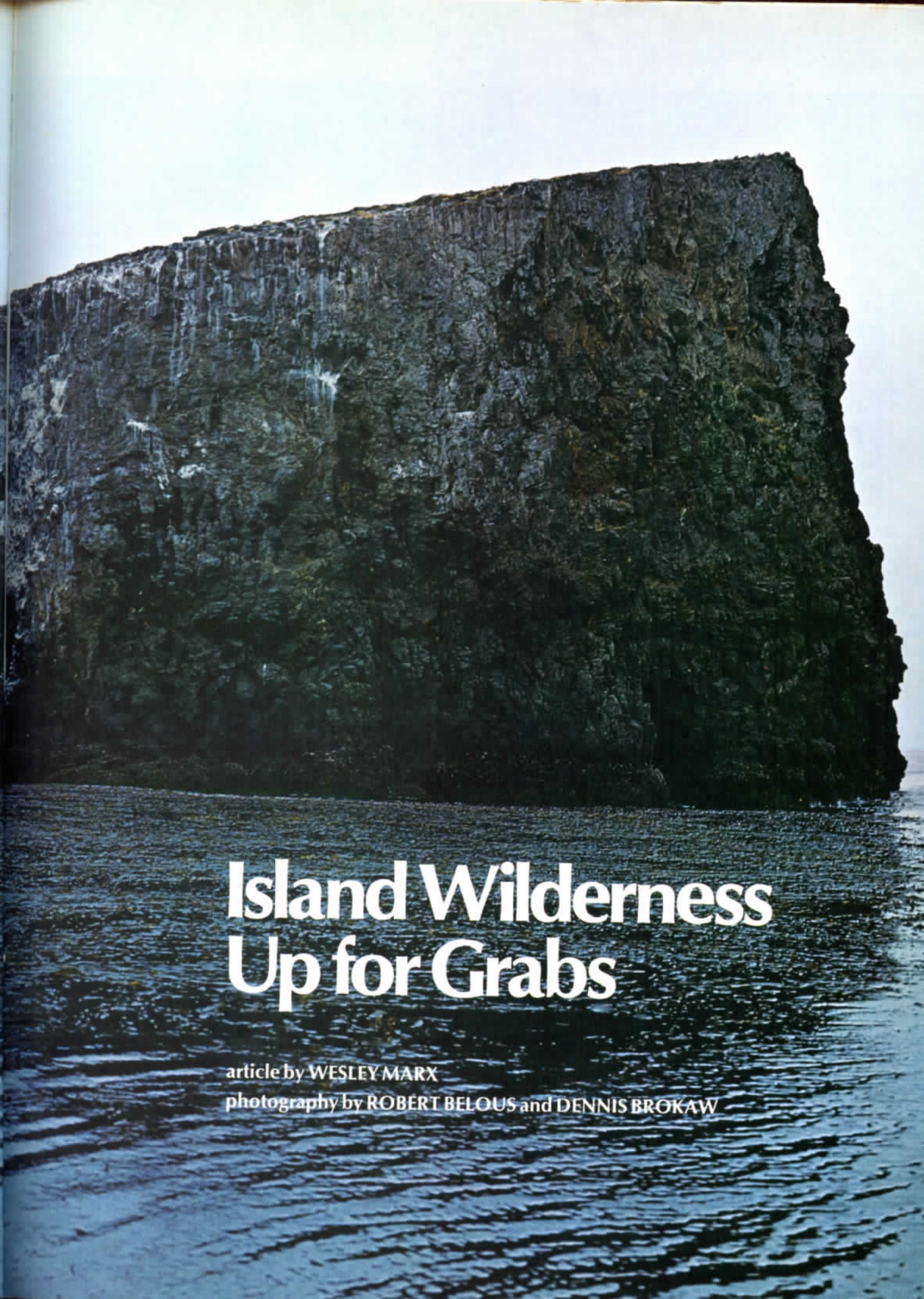
AUDUBON

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The seabird islets of Anacapa (by Dennis Brokaw)

A large, dark, craggy rock formation rises from the ocean. The rock face is textured with vertical fissures and some lighter-colored mineral deposits. The water in the foreground is dark blue with gentle ripples. The sky above is a pale, overcast grey.

Island Wilderness Up for Grabs

article by WESLEY MARX

photography by ROBERT BELOUS and DENNIS BROKAW

I WAS DRIVING AT NIGHT ALONG CALIFORNIA'S COAST on U.S. 101. A college student, I was on a spring pilgrimage to the beaches of Southern California. Around dawn the highway sliced through a silent Santa Barbara, then along the Pacific shore. I glanced away from the endless macadam and saw what appeared to be a mountain range moored at sea. This was my first sight of the northern Channel Islands.

Since then, I have come much closer—to beach on pebbly shores and to sleep in the protection of rock-walled harbor coves. I have seen a procession of natural life I could not hope to see anywhere else.

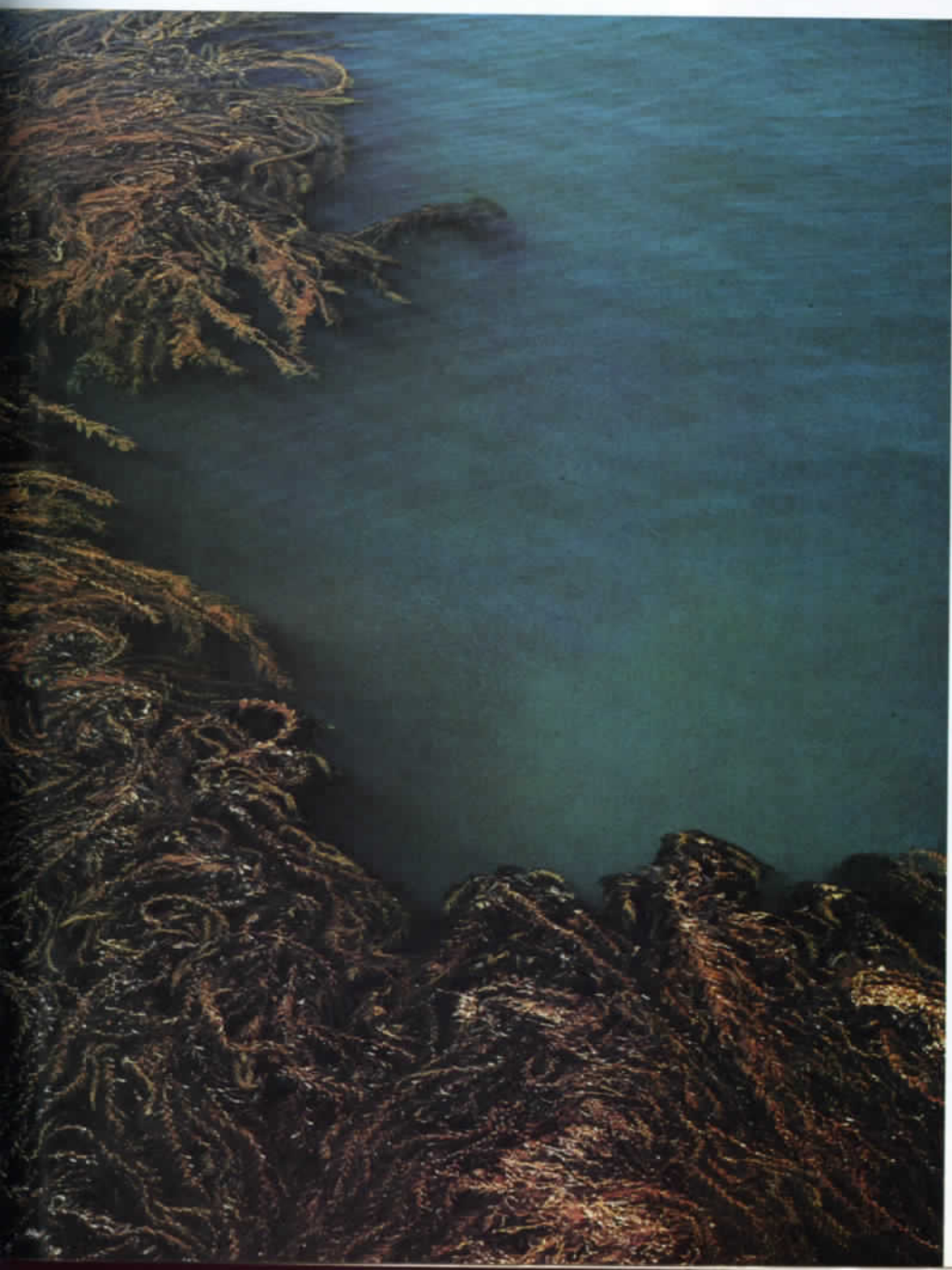
At the same time I have seen no fluorescent traffic signs or plastic begonias or sewage outfalls, and but one "billboard"—a grounded freighter with "For Sale" painted on its rusting hull. Yet one look to the east and there, trailing on the horizon like a smudged pencil line, lies Earth's outstanding example of a man-altered environment. Within a century the hills of Southern California have been scalped, valleys fast-tracted, rivers rerouted and dammed, shorelines bulkheaded, beaches eroded, estuaries buried, skies sullied, and the natural world all but exterminated. Between this deformed environment and the island wilderness lies an oceanic moat that could become a thousand-lane bridge—or a sloppy field steeped in high DDT counts and punctuated with leaking oil rigs.

On a map the northern Channel Islands resemble geological debris that litters the near shore. Santa Cruz, the largest island, stretches 21 miles, has an average width of 5 miles, and reaches 2,400 feet at its highest point. Santa Rosa and San Miguel follow in order of size. Anacapa, the smallest, is but five miles long and a half-mile wide. Yet Anacapa, with its steep bluffs and rocky headlands that smash into the Pacific like a fist, exudes the same rugged personality as its largest neighbor, Santa Cruz. "The shore is perpendicular," noted one early Anacapa visitor. This vertical landscape bakes under a "Mediterranean" sun that leaves a residue of prickly-pear cactus and desolate oaks over many of the steep hills. When winter rains come, trillions of drops trace their courses down the gravelly slopes, through fast-dropping canyons, and over bluffs into the ocean. In a heavy rain the coastal bluffs become great, wide waterfalls.

Yet within this bold landscape lie inviting retreats. Coves honeycomb the bluffs. The edge of the cove may be a sand beach, and the beach may merge into the folds of a canyon that shelters a waterfall to bathe boaters. Stands of ramrod bishop pine and rare, wind-bent Torrey pine look down on Robinson Jeffers' "elfin forest" of thick chaparral. Sociable island foxes, along with skunks, deer, and feral sheep and hogs, dart in and out of canyon springs and scamper across grasslands tucked in narrow, elongated valleys.

In the spring this landscape comes alive. Raindrops that manage to seep beneath the crust moisten dry seeds, and soon blue lupine and orange poppies appear. Wildflower perfumes mingle with sea breezes. Reddish foxes with ears that dwarf their faces stand chest deep in poppy fields. A treelike plant with a stubby grayish trunk suddenly sprouts bright green leaves and yellow blossoms the size of sunflowers. These giant coreopsis may blend into a yellow canopy that can be seen miles out at sea, like a stick of





The Channel Islands—a harbor on San Miguel and a hillside of giant coreopsis. A grotto on Santa Barbara, a sanctuary for sea lions and elephant seals. A portrait of an elephant seal, once near extinction (all by Robert Belous). And the canopy of a submarine forest of giant kelp (by Dennis Brokaw).

butter wavering on the horizon. Spring is no more than a quickening blush, but of the deepest intensity.

It is on the shoreline that the vitality of the Channel Islands really asserts itself. Ocean currents swirl about these islands, slamming into each other and tossing up surf 40 feet high. The currents bathe the rocky shore with micronutrients, and these nutrients succor thriving communities of mussels, abalone, starfish, urchins, flowerlike anemones, and barnacles. The island shoreline is encrusted with life in hues of purple, orange, green, and bright red. This tidal life—compact, sedentary, seemingly without limbs or senses—flourishes in niches alternately drenched by surf and sun rays. The islands offer a million such niches.

Offshore, the surface of the sea may be blanketed with a rippling canopy of long brown leaves. These filter out nutrients from the rich sea solution and pass them down long, ivylike stems that sustain the giant bladder kelp plant, *Macrocystis pyrifera*. One of the fastest-growing plants in the world, giant kelp can reach a length of 200 feet. Unfurled from a rootlike "holdfast" that grips the rocky seabed, the plant's enormous length sprawls over the sunlit surface of the ocean. The two-foot-long leaves or "blades" hang like streamers from the stem. A colony of kelp plants can form a submarine forest eight square miles in size.

In the northern hemisphere giant bladder kelp exists only off the coast of California (both Baja and Alta). The largest forests flourish in the currents off the Channel Islands. A first descent into a sea forest can be somewhat unsettling. The silent, swaying kelp vines seem ready to reach out and ensnare the intruder. The multiarms of an octopus immediately come to mind. But then you see fish of every size and color nonchalantly gliding through openings in the foliage, and soon you do the same. Whereas life within a land forest scampers and hides at the first man-made crack of a twig, life within a sea forest seems unimpressed by our presence. One looks perch in the eye, only to be outstared. Schools of smelt pass like rain showers. What appears to be a flame in search of a fire is a garibaldi, the goldfish of the ocean.

On the forest rim bonito, barracuda, and swordfish may circle, patiently waiting for stray smelt and other forage. Occasionally an object will crash into the forest from above in a bubbling cascade and just as quickly rocket skyward. It is a cormorant diving for fish. Above the kelp forests and the shore fly gulls, petrels, pelicans, guillemots, auklets, and black oystercatchers. These seabirds nest in the shore bluffs and on the sea stacks, secure from egg-loving foxes. The Channel Islands rank as a superlative seabird habitat.

The islands serve as a fine habitat for another fascinating spectrum of life. One day the National Park Service power cruiser *Cougar* anchored off San Miguel. I left its solid deck for a bobbing dinghy. From ashore a roar like that from a football stadium carried over the thunder of the surf. Ranger Vern Betts, at the oars of the dinghy, rode the incoming swells as cautiously as a bronc rider. The *Cougar* and the island intermittently disappeared from view as we slid into troughs. Suddenly a beach cove appeared ahead, while a swell began cresting underneath us. We rocketed toward the cove, the hull scraping the rough beach.



The Channel Islands—black oystercatchers on a sculptured rock, foxes and burrowing owls hunting mice, and on San Miguel, sea lions relaxing in a sandy cove, a red carpet of ice plant, and a caliche forest of fossilized logs and trunks of ancient trees.







Sea lions sun on the rocks just above the pounding surf below the 635-foot-high cliffs of Santa Barbara Island, one of two Channel Islands protected since 1938 as a national monument. (Photographed by Dennis Brokaw)

I hopped out as the wave receded in a rattle of stones and found myself staring at one of the contributors to the stadiumlike roar, an elephant seal. This one was "small," a ponderous cow, beige-colored, with liquid brown eyes and a sweet doglike face that now bared teeth. The assurance that elephant seals are generally harmless becomes ephemeral when you confront one. Only when she began retreating did I feel assured. It wasn't so much the act of retreat as the manner—clumsily, with great effort, her marine prowess reduced to snaillike sluggishness on land. She kept retreating until she was against the cove walls, along with four other timid giants. My initial anxiousness was replaced by a certain repulsion at how my presence could reduce this magnificent creature to childlike cowering.

Her ancestors were slaughtered by my ancestors as effortlessly as cows in a stockyard to furnish oil for the lamps of the Western frontier and sex charms for Chinese mandarins. A last-minute prohibition saved the northern elephant seal. As a result, San Miguel Island, not far from smog alerts and twelve-car freeway collisions, has become a principal stage for one of the most remarkable comebacks in wildlife annals. In 1892, fewer than 100 northern elephant seals clustered on Guadalupe Island, off Baja California. This remnant herd began spreading out to reclaim ancestral rookeries hundreds of miles away. By 1950 there were perhaps 50 elephant seals on San Miguel; by 1959, 412; and today, more than 3,000. Amid the elephant seals are other returnees from the brink, the Guadalupe fur seal and the Alaska fur seal. Another ghost from the past, the cublike sea otter, has been seen floating on his back in the kelp canopy, his body gently anchored by an entwining vine.

No aquarium on the mainland can match the magnificence of this sanctuary for the nearly exterminated. Indeed, the kin of the seal you see balancing a colored ball on his nose are probably gliding through a Channel Island kelp forest. Here the California sea lion, favorite of seal trainers, puts on a much more spectacular show, as if confident of not being upstaged by a precocious dolphin. He may leap clear of the surf to land on a rock shelf, later returning to the water by diving off a ten-foot-high ledge. No other animal is so continually loud-mouthed. The islands pulsate with the squeal of seabirds, the snort of feral hogs, and the cadence of the surf, but it is the vibrant roar of the rookery that remains in the ear of the visitor. Sea lion bulls like to collect cows, and the collecting process contributes to the decibels.

The sun-loving elephant seal prefers sandspits to rock coves or sea grottoes. At sea this grandly obese form (up to 8,000 pounds and 20 feet long) chases down squid, rays, sharks, and ratfish. Some of the bulls display remarkable agility and stamina on the land as well. On one island rookery, investigators Dr. Burney J. LeBoeuf and the late Dr. Richard Peterson of the University of California at Santa Cruz estimated that 4 percent of the bulls

inseminated 85 percent of the females. Given this reservoir of sexual potency, the comeback of the elephant seal is better understood. One bull can go a long way.

Around December the gray whale passes by, en route from feeding grounds in the Arctic Ocean to calving grounds in the lagoons of Baja California. Sometimes the gray whales will go into a pinwheel formation, the heads at the hub, the flukes as thrashing spokes. The flukes are meant for the smaller but swifter killer whale. If the killer whale can avoid the flaying flukes, he will tear out the tongue of the gray, for his mouth is rimmed with teeth instead of baleen.

The display of life on the islands is a magnet for scientists and naturalists. By 1943 there were more than a thousand references to the northern Channel Islands in the scientific literature. For bat devotees alone, there are eight species awaiting observation. Many biologists study the dramatic and sometimes subtle differences between mainland and island life. The island fox, for instance, is generally smaller than its mainland relatives, while the island scrub jay appears to be larger and a deeper blue than its mainland kin. Some scientists contend these differences stem from evolutionary divergence, while others argue that species development has been arrested by isolation from the mainland. The islands thus are fostering a searching and sometimes caustic debate over the basic mechanics of evolution.

THESE ISLANDS, RINGED BY LIFE as dense and varied as life in relatively unaltered continental habitats, have sustained a rather special human history. In 1947 an archeologist with the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, Dr. Phil C. Orr, was rummaging about some bluffs on Santa Rosa when he came across charred bones in a pit burned to brick red. The bones belonged to a dwarf mammoth that flourished at a time when the Santa Monica Mountains of Southern California extended out into the Pacific to include the Channel Islands. To the excited Orr, the location and condition of the bones suggested that one of our ancestors may have been barbecuing dwarf mammoth in an open-air hearth. A carbon-14 test at Columbia University's Lamont-Doherty Geological Observatory determined the bones to be 29,650 years old. If Orr's supposition, which has not received unqualified scientific acceptance, is ever confirmed, the islands would be known as one of the earliest sites to support man's habitation in North America.

With time, the ocean rose, the dwarf mammoth disappeared, and the sea forests and the tidal zones ushered in a new environment. A branch of the coastal Chumash Indians came to dwell here. They harvested abalone and mussels for food. Seals provided bladder gourds and soft winter capes. Whalebone supported dome-shaped houses thatched with sea grass. Ground-up cactus was used as chum to attract and trap smelt in fish baskets. Asphaltum from submarine oil seeps served to caulk plank canoes and weight down the sea-grass skirts of maidens. This marine environment supported one of the most dense Indian settlements in North America. San Miguel Island is nine miles long and no wider than four miles. Yet this island alone was inhabited by an estimated 2,000 Chu-



From Chumash Indian middens on San Miguel Island in the Channel Islands of California came this arrowhead and a palm-sized "doughnut stone," a tool believed to have been used for straightening spear shafts.

mash, according to archeologist Charles Rozaire of the Los Angeles County Museum. These were Indians who never had to learn how to sow seed, propitiate the rain god, or beware of the rattlesnake or the mountain lion.

The Chumash found beauty as well as a bountiful subsistence in their marine surroundings. Clamshells were chipped and rounded into necklaces. Shallow pockets were hewn out of the shoulder bones of whales and filled with hot asphaltum. Pressed into these pockets was abalone shell, whose interior possesses a mother-of-pearl sheen. The shoulder bone with the abalone inlay became a funeral bier. Cave walls were decorated with red, white, and black representations of fish and seals. (This artistic accomplishment of the Chumash is explored in the beautifully illustrated *The Rock Paintings of the Chumash*, by Campbell Grant.) Soapstone was shaped into fish and whales. Soapstone killer whales occasionally smiled with an upturned mouth. The generous bounty of the islands gave the Chumash the time and the inspiration to be cheerful artists. They were, as described by early Spanish explorers, a happy, handsome, and hospitable people.

Today fewer than a hundred people inhabit the northern Channel Islands, and yet the island environment undergoes stresses and strains that the Chumash never exerted. Plundering of the islands' bounty started with the fur and seal hunters of the nineteenth century. George Nidever, Black Steward, and sharpshooters from Russia provided Chinese mandarins with otter pelts to warm their shoulders, seal sex organs to offset impotence, and seal whiskers to clean opium pipes.

At the same time, these entrepreneurs nearly exterminated the sea otter, the elephant seal, the fur seal,

and the Chumash. Indian fur hunters imported from the Aleutians terrorized the easygoing natives. The cave painters and soapstone carvers were finally evacuated from their sea-grass homes and converted into Christian "braceros" on the mainland. The Chumash must have brought some beautiful myths, customs, and dances from their island homes, but we will never be able to read about them. While the elephant seals have made it back, the island Chumash died off or were absorbed on the mainland before anthropologists and historians could learn from them.

One island has suffered a fate nearly as complete as the Chumash. After putting himself out of business by purging seals and otters, George Nidever decided to import sheep, hogs, and burros to San Miguel. The hunting grounds became a sheep pasture. And the island soil began blowing into the ocean as the sheep consumed the grass cover. Undaunted, Nidever shipped in grain to sustain his destructive flock. Stowed away in the grain were thistles, and these took hold to help choke off the grasses and the shrubs that kept the Indians in berries and the island in spring blossoms.

By the 1930s San Miguel had acquired a new caretaker that didn't mind blowing sand and thistles. "The island itself is unique and made to order for our firings," declared an official of the Department of the Navy. By 1960 another Navy official could describe this punching bag for naval salvos as being "heavily entombed with ammunition."

Another nine years saw environmental violence affecting all the islands escalated to a new zenith. The submarine oil seeps that caulked Chumash canoes had quickened the ambitions of the petroleum industry. And in January 1969 the Santa Barbara Channel offshore oil blowout, a result of inadequate well casing and geological knowledge, smeared the waters and the shore. The Union Oil Company and the federal government, which granted the offshore leases, had minimized the dangerous fact that the seeps, besides indicating the presence of oil, also suggested a weak and fractured channel stratum. Oil slicks washed up on the San Miguel shore and fostered reports of seal pup kills. Investigations verified that seals were indeed coated with oil and that some pups were dead, but no conclusive link was found.

Sea lion pups can succumb to a number of natural causes—malnutrition, lungworm infestation, premature birth or abortion, trauma, and being washed out to sea. A mortality rate of at least 15 percent during pupping season is normal, according to Dr. LeBoeuf and Robert Brownell of the Department of Pathobiology at Johns Hopkins University. However, if the spill had occurred earlier in the pupping season, when females were nursing and their teats were exposed to oil, the pups might have ingested mother's milk liberally laced with Santa Barbara crude. This sort of additive could be deadly. More than likely, seals will be put to this test. Although Secretary of the Interior Rogers C.B. Morton vetoed his own department's recommendation for two new producing platforms, he lifted suspension of exploratory drilling on fourteen oil and gas leases in the Santa Barbara Channel.

The oil industry's presence collides rather uniquely with another devastating interest in the Channel Islands

area. For the islands lie between the Navy's Point Mugu missile range and the Air Force's Vandenberg missile range. Here, in the Santa Barbara Channel, the Navy tries out heat-seeking rockets and missiles. One oil executive told a *Los Angeles Times* reporter, "One of the things that bothers us is that those things were designed to sink the very sort of vessel we're drilling from." Indeed, three years ago, a Navy pilot fresh from Vietnam cut loose a Bullpup missile that sank a Navy patrol vessel.

Even the U.S. government has become edgy about the possibility of a missile-oil rig mishap, and federal oil leases in the Santa Barbara Channel stipulate that oil companies hold the U.S. government harmless for damage from stray or aborted missiles. There are also stipulations to suspend and evacuate oil operations when the crossfire becomes particularly intense. While oil personnel can easily be evacuated, oil drilling platforms and seal rookeries cannot.

Nor are seals immune from more mundane firepower. LeBoeuf and other investigators have come across seal corpses riddled with buckshot and bullets. There are people, unbelievable though it may seem, who enjoy shooting at seal rookeries from the decks of their powercraft. Just shooting tin ducks at penny arcades will not do.

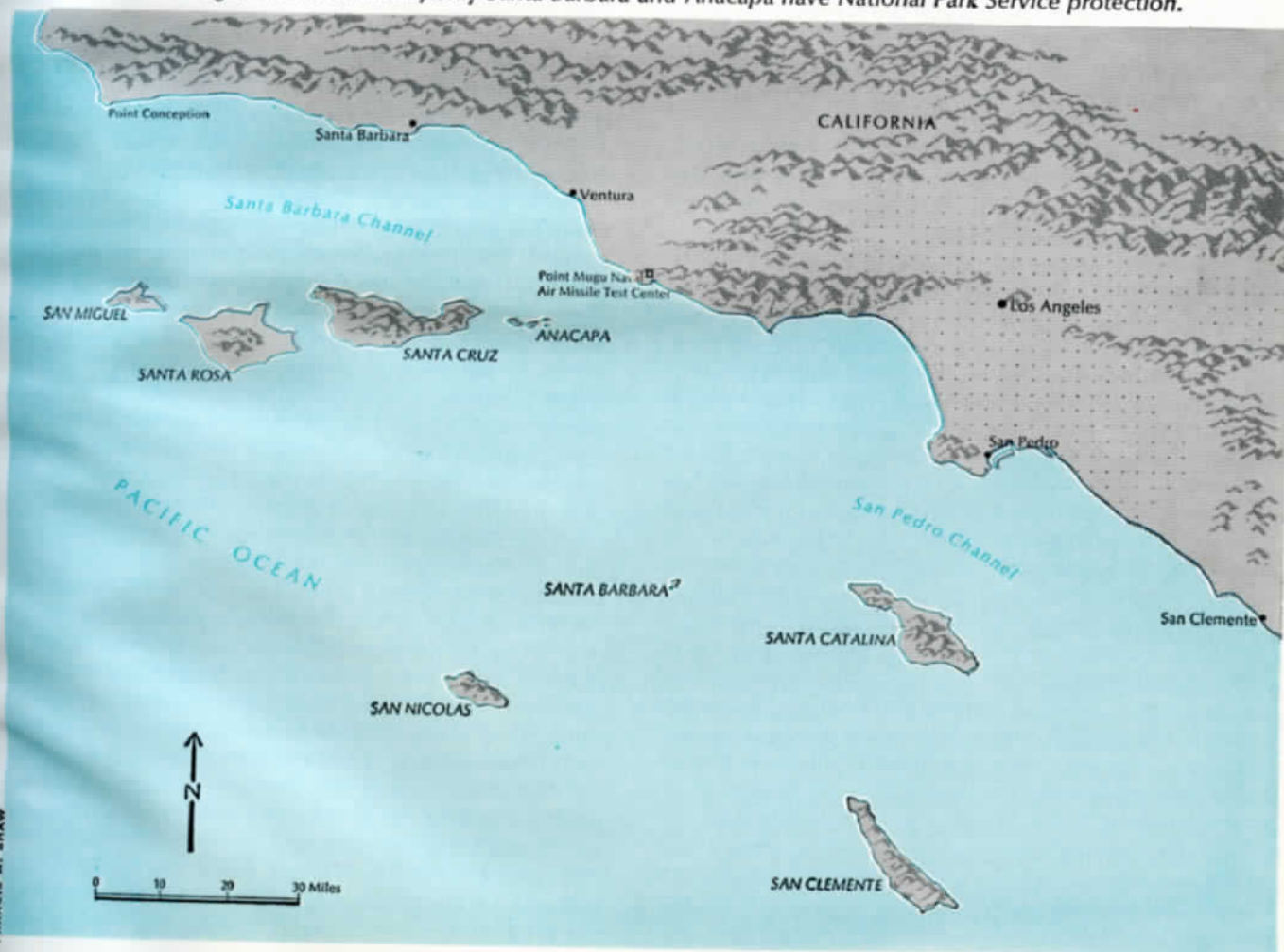
Commercial fishermen may legally shoot sea lions in-

terfering with fishing operations, and some fishermen interpret interference rather broadly because they consider the sea lion a competitor. Yet no correlation has been shown between tonnage of sea lions executed and tonnage of fish caught; indeed, the abundance of fishlife around rookeries suggests that sea lions are more far-sighted capitalists than commercial fishermen.

Seals, like pelicans, are at the top of the marine food web. However, scientists had not found the same disturbing uptake of DDT in seals as in pelicans until LeBoeuf and his colleague Michael Bonnell ran tests on the blubber of Channel Island sea lions. They are finding the highest DDT concentrations in seals to date, as much as 2,678 parts per million. The Channel Island seals, in their deceptive sanctuary bliss, inhabit waters regularly saturated with chemical pollutants that wash into the channel from the mainland and infiltrate the food chain.

Until a few months ago those waters also got a good dose of DDT from the Montrose Chemical Corporation plant near Los Angeles. Not unexpectedly, it was the Channel Islands where Dr. Robert Risebrough of the University of California at Berkeley came across pelican nesting grounds littered with brittle eggshells and dried-up yolk rather than with young pelicans. Risebrough and other scientists have linked the brittle eggshells to DDT uptake and its impact on the reproductive process. "The

Of the eight Channel Islands, only Santa Barbara and Anacapa have National Park Service protection.





A burrowing owl scans the meadows of Santa Barbara from his observation post atop a stalk of giant coreopsis.

effect of organochlorine pesticides on sea lion mortality is unknown. California sea lions show the highest DDT residues of any pinniped examined thus far, and investigations of the possibility that pesticides induce premature pupping in this species are just beginning," reports LeBoeuf.

Thus after squeaking by the deadly aim of Black Steward and George Nidever and barely making it into the twentieth century, the seals of the Channel Islands must now face more modern and insidious survival tests.

Today, on San Miguel Island, as one looks at a bomb crater, the thistles, and the blowing sands, it is hard to believe that thousands of people who liked to shape soapstone into smiling whales once lived here. Though devoid of a single hard-top road, sewage outfall, or sanitary landfill, San Miguel still smarts from desecration. However, it is these mainland amenities that now threaten to engulf Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa Islands, even though the three owners, who use the islands as livestock pasture, are sensitive to more natural island values. They have allowed botanists, archeologists, and ecologists to do fieldwork on these "evolution factories." And the Santa Cruz Island Company has permitted the University of California at Santa Barbara to establish a field station there. In a pioneer exercise in biological control, mealybugs, introduced by entomologists, suck dry the pads of prickly-pear cactus and permit island grasses devastated by sheep grazing to revive. Cattle now munch on this soft green revival.

However, property taxes can make cattle pastures, even at sea, less and less remunerative, and an affluent residential clientele on the mainland makes another land use appealing, so appealing that men's minds undergo wondrous conversions. While formulating a general land use plan for Santa Barbara County, which includes these is-

lands, planning officials questioned the owners about their property. "These guys almost sounded like they wanted to secede from the Union," recalls one planner. The islands that once supported thousands of Chumash were pictured as a sort of island badlands, dangerous of approach and harassed by incessant winds, low rainfall, and below-freezing temperatures. Agricultural classification was requested and granted.

A few years later a development plan was submitted to the Santa Barbara County Planning Commission. The plan spoke of an island graced by a "Mediterranean climate." "Frost is unknown on the island, and summer heat is tempered by the sea breezes." The island referred to is Santa Cruz, and the plan's sponsor is Pier Gherini, an owner of the eastern portion of Santa Cruz. The plan would accommodate 3,000 "financially substantial immigrants." A 3,000-foot airstrip would be surrounded by sand traps and fairways; the golf course would be surrounded by fairway residences. Hot asphaltum would once more be in vogue, but not in the service of maiden modesty. Sixteen miles of highways would be strapped over the landscape to buckle together two villages. Approximately 100,000 cubic yards of shore would be shuffled around to accommodate a natural-enough improvisation in Southern California, an "artificial fjord." A hunting club would give chase to feral sheep and hogs, while a reservoir would help lure waterfowl within gun range. It is a conventional residential plan by Southern California standards. A hydrocarbon habitat for financially substantial immigrants who can golf would replace a remarkable habitat for wildlife and for a growing populace committed to outdoor values.

However, while the Gherini vision was approved for inclusion in the county's general plan in 1966, the fjord, the sand traps, and the beauty parlors have not yet ma-

terialized. The explanation for all this intricate maneuvering may lie in the presence of a prospective property owner who actually views the islands as islands.

The National Park Service has been interested in the Channel Islands since at least the early 1930s, but it was not until 1938 that the Department of the Interior succeeded in persuading President Franklin D. Roosevelt to set aside two islands, Anacapa and Santa Barbara, which is 40 miles south of the northern chain, as the Channel Islands National Monument. Some momentum for Park Service protection of the rest of the chain started building in the late 1950s. A "Pacific Coast Recreation Area Survey" by the National Park Service concluded, "The Channel Islands collectively constitute the greatest single remaining opportunity for the conservation and preservation of representative seashore values, including biology, geology, history, archeology, paleontology, wilderness, and recreation." Although a Channel Island National Park bill introduced in 1963 by the late Senator Clair Engle received strong endorsement by then Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall, the bill died in committee. In 1970 another report, this one by the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation, entitled "Islands Of America" recommended Congressional action to authorize seven national island parks, including the Channel Islands. This time around both California senators, Alan Cranston and John Tunney, are co-sponsoring park bills. Whether the bills will get a hearing during this session of Congress depends on Senator Henry Jackson of Washington, head of the Senate Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs.

When the National Park Service enters the picture, property owners are often seized with the need to reclassify their land for higher use and espouse high revenue-producing activity to benefit local tax rolls. If this is indeed the Gherini strategy, a number of factors could militate against it. For the islands manage to raise a number of obstacles to fast-track development, including the need for transportation from the mainland and extensive investment in water supplies, sewers, and fire-fighting equipment.

MOREOVER, THE ISLANDS have unexpected friends. Although local interests are often beguiled by money-making visions that promise to thwart National Park Service "takeovers," the Santa Barbara oil spill has awakened an environmental catharsis among residents that tends to counter such hoary visions. The city councils of Santa Barbara and Ventura favor national park status, and even the Chamber of Commerce of Ventura County waxes lyrical on the values of elephant seals, giant coreopsis, and bladder kelp. Even before the blowout, the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors approved Gherini's switch in perspective with the admonition that "possible development of the area as a national park would provide, from a planning standpoint, an equally acceptable use of the land without conflict with the county general plan." And the other owners on Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa might be willing to consider mainland grazing property in the public domain in exchange for their island fiefs.

But while the National Park Service may appear to

some as the gallant savior in the struggle for the destiny of the islands, some scientists, including Dr. Phil Orr, are not persuaded that conservation and recreation would mix well on the islands. If the islands were to be developed as intensively as, say, Yosemite, national park status would indeed be a Pyrrhic victory. Park plans, according to National Park Service official Thomas Tucker, would "embrace a pure park concept of management rather than one primarily oriented to recreation."

When and if the time for public visitation comes, Park Service plans for all the islands would ban the automobile and confine all movement to nature trails. Visitors could be brought over on hydrofoil or helicopter ferries, according to Don Robinson, superintendent of the Channel Islands National Monument. Seabird and seal rookeries would enjoy extensive buffer zones. Already the National Park Service has proposed new regulations to ban commercial fishing activities (including sea lion assassinations) off the present two national monument islands, Anacapa and Santa Barbara.

If ever realized, protection for the Channel Islands could hold enormous social potential that transcends traditional preservation concerns. The islands could become a critical ecological and social baseline next door to a region beset by environmental havoc of the most dire sort. These islands have already seen one major wildlife comeback through protective legislation on marine mammals. And marine biologist Nancy Nicholson of the University of Southern California suggests that the Channel Islands may serve as life banks, providing marine fauna to restore and restock beleaguered mainland shores. The intact life-support system of the islands thus becomes a resource in itself, providing the potential knowledge to reverse mainland abuses. Very few urbanized regions are fortunate enough to still retain such a natural reservoir of life. It would be folly to condemn islands that could become such formidable testimonials to our ability to mend our planet.

Amid these perspectives, reports reoccur that Gherini is in negotiations with blue-chip corporations that wield the financial and political clout to water and sewer his property. Associated Press reporter Susan Sward quoted Gherini as saying, when Senator Tunney introduced his bill earlier this year, that Santa Cruz Island "should be developed for people who can financially afford to live there and pay for the privilege." Gherini can't be blamed for pursuing well-heeled residents and the profit motive. The real responsibility for protecting islands of national and international significance lies elsewhere. The Nixon Administration has yet to take a firm position on national park status, even though the Union Oil blowout on Platform A is a stern reminder that the area deserves a far better shake from the federal government. "These islands are 'of the sea,'" observes Dr. Stanley A. Cain, former Assistant Secretary of the Interior. "Mighty forces have sculpted them and set them apart, and man must not be allowed to change all this. He *should* be allowed to revel in it." San Miguel and its island sisters can once more provide sustenance for people, but not on the terms of the deformed environment to the east. The soapstone whale in the drifting island sands testifies to this. So does Union Oil's signature on the shoe of the beholder. ■

